



The Collective Security Treaty Organization,  
the Caspian and the Northern Distribution Network:

# Central Asia in the Crossfire *Survival or War?*

ZHULDUZ BAIZAKOVA

Republic of Kazakhstan



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### **Author Background**

Zhulduz Baizakova is a graduate from Kazakh National University and has a MSc degree in International Security and Global Governance, Birkbeck College, University of London, where she successfully defended her dissertation on NATO peacekeeping activities. She served for seven years in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, including a posting to the United Kingdom. Baizakova is currently specializing in defense and security issues in Central Asia.

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## **Introduction by Matthew Stein, FMSO**

*In May 2012 Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defense held «KADEX-2012», an exhibition of weapons and military equipment. The exhibition was the second of its kind (the first took place in 2010) and included a number of international companies working in the defense sector, as well as some from Kazakhstan. While some critics looked at KADEX as more of a show than a real exhibition, the event demonstrated that Kazakhstan has made a few steps to continue growing its defense industry and has continued to separate itself from its Central Asian neighbors economically.*

*The following article by Zhulduz Baizakova provides a particular perspective of how not only Kazakhstan, but also all Central Asian governments have been developing their militaries in response to regional security threats. Perhaps the most unique perspective that Baizakova offers is of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The CSTO and SCO often present themselves as a strong alliance and providers of security in the region, but, according to Baizakova, there are areas where the two organizations fall short. Ultimately, as Baizakova explains, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan play a larger role in regional security outside of the CSTO and SCO than they are given credit for.*

# The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Caspian and the Northern Distribution Network: Central Asia in the Crossfire

## Survival or War?

By *Zhulduz Baizakova*  
Republic of Kazakhstan  
Edited by Matthew Stein, FMSO

Central Asia is a very complex and unpredictable region in which processes requiring careful comprehensive study and analysis are constantly taking place. The West calls the five Central Asian countries “the Stans,” which indicates a tendency to view the region as a single entity rather than considering each country individually from the standpoint of its development and current position in the world. The content and makeup of the Stans’ natural resources, socio-political processes and military capacity differ, but these differences are not always apparent to an outsider observer. Yet the region has been undergoing major strategic and geopolitical changes with respect to both national and regional security.



Map of Central Asia  
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The face-off of the big countries in the region began as soon as the Central Asian republics received their independence in the early 1990s. Beginning in 2001 a US-led antiterrorist coalition solidified its position in the region to realize US foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan. The Taliban was overthrown and Russia recognized NATO’s stabilizing role in the region. With the announced withdrawal of the coalition forces in 2014, the balance has once again been upset. There is more to this, however, than just external factors. It should not be assumed that the countries of the region are merely passive observers of a game whose rules are dictated by the major powers.

Over the last few years failures of two regional security organizations – the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – to provide security have demonstrated the weakness of the partner relations among their members and of their leaders as well. This failure is evidenced by the fact that neither organization has been able since its inception to help to resolve any major conflict or crisis in the region. It is apparent that neither the SCO nor CSTO plans to play the role of security guarantor after the coalition forces withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014. It is equally apparent that, despite its declared goals of resolving regional water and energy conflicts, SCO was never able to arbitrate the water disputes among Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Again, although it conducts regional antiterrorist and antidrug exercises, CSTO is not in a position to offer the requisite help to Central Asian countries to counter drugs and terrorists, since both phenomena continue to grow year after year.

Each Central Asian country is currently experiencing change and pursuing a more hardline policy vis-à-vis its own security. Kazakhstan alone adopted a new Law on National Security, a Military Doctrine and a National Security Strategy over the last two years. In 2010, Turkmenistan announced a reform to form a navy. Uzbekistan opposes any collective rapid deployment force within CSTO and advocates stronger bilateral military-technical cooperation. Kyrgyzstan wants to strengthen its defense capability by locating another base on its territory. Tajikistan is also actively protecting its national interests by hosting SCO's Peace Mission-2012.

Right now the chief worries for the region's countries are the situation around Iran and the Caspian, where Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are involved in heavy militarization; withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan and the US administration's plans to distribute materiel and equipment to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; and Uzbekistan's recent withdrawal from CSTO, and, consequently, the organization's future as a regional security institution. It bears mentioning that all these factors are, in one way or another, prompting Central Asian CSTO members to take certain steps to ensure their national security, reflected first and foremost in larger defense budgets and the volume, sources and scale of military procurements.

Government spending on defense has been rising steadily in some of the Central Asian states. According to SIPRI, Kazakhstan's defense spending rose from \$206 million in 1999 to \$855 million in 2008, and Kyrgyzstan's from \$44.8 to \$79.3 million. If the latter's rise seems small, it still indicates progression. It should also be noted that exact figures of defense budgets for Central Asian states are difficult to obtain. Uzbekistan has one of the fastest growing military budgets in Central Asia. The International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance 2010 says that Uzbekistan's armed forces are the most combat capable in the region. Uzbekistan currently spends more than 4 percent of its GDP (approximately \$1.2 billion) on defense but, despite the seeming boom in defense spending, the country has not been involved in any major military business deals, suggesting that instead of purchasing modern materiel and arms, Uzbekistan is spending on upgrades, maintenance or other administrative expenses.

Some Russian experts believe that the reason for Uzbekistan's high defense spending is its complex socio-political situation, speculating that its militarization is related to President Karimov's plans to bring to heel (after 2014) Afghan provinces populated by Uzbeks and to the country's eternal conflicts with its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan regularly poisons relations with Tajikistan over construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power plant. Relations with the Kyrgyz soured after the incident in June 2010, when ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz clashed in southern Kyrgyzstan. The majority of those killed during the clashes were Uzbek and the government of Kyrgyzstan was blamed for not stopping the violence quickly enough.

On June 4, 2012 Vladimir Putin visited Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where Karimov made it clear that Uzbekistan would be expecting Russia to resolve the major security problem in the region after the "peacekeeping



Uzbek President Islom  
Abdug'aniyevich Karimov  
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forces” withdrew from Afghanistan. Putin gave no concrete response to the request. Uzbekistan countered by “suspending” its CSTO membership at the end of June. In a Russian newspaper interview, Russian Chief of General Staff Nikolai Makarov said that Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from CSTO “was not a big surprise” and that the Uzbeks had never participated in any de facto manner in the organization.<sup>1</sup> In this author’s opinion, the easiest thing for Russia to do now is to say that it expected nothing different from the Uzbeks. In the meantime, everyone is immediately going to try to forget that it was less than a month earlier that Karimov had virtually begged Putin not to abandon Central Asia after the American withdrawal. Already the speculation is that the West offered Karimov a deal he could not refuse in the form of a new military base; since CSTO rules prohibit members from locating third country military facilities on their territory, Tashkent preferred to solve the problem in the easiest and most convenient way.

The West, meanwhile, is prepared to cooperate with Tashkent on a large range of issues, including improving human rights. In a Radio Free Europe interview, Patricia Flor, the new European Union (EU) Special Representative for Central Asia, said that it was right to drop the EU sanctions against Uzbekistan and that there have been certain steps towards improvement in the country. The EU is also planning to open a delegation in Tashkent.

Tashkent’s defense policies remain an enigma for observers. Its defense budget grows year after year, which worries both its closest neighbors and non-CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. The question remains, however, as to why the Uzbek armed forces are considered the most combat capable in the region. They have never actually participated in any major SCO or CSTO exercises. Nor is it possible to observe these capabilities, given the absence of any current conflicts.

Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country that managed to get on the select list of Military Balance 2012 procurements, which mentions two major deals: 40 S-300 air defense systems and 20 MIG-31 fighter jets, both of which were brokered by Rosoboronexport. The purchase of this much materiel from Russia shows that, despite plans to diversify, Kazakhstan prefers to do business with its northern neighbor for the time being. The fact also remains that the Kazakhstan’s defense budget has increased 25-fold in the 20 years of its independence. Some data project 2012-2014 spending to be roughly 1 trillion 12 billion tenge (around 6.75 billion dollars), with one fourth of the 2012 budget allocated to purchasing modern communications equipment and upgrading, overhauling and repairing materiel.

The first Kazakh-made rocket artillery ship, 250-ton displacement, was launched into Caspian waters in the spring of 2012. Other homemade combat vessels are expected to be added to the fleet over the next few years. Eurasianet writes that Kazakhstan plans to turn the Aktau seaport into a hub for transporting military cargo from Afghanistan, bypassing Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry reports that more than 15,000 containers passed through the port in 2009-2011, which is the bulk of the cargo transported through the Northern Distribution Network (NDN).



Patricia Flor, EU Special Representative for Central Asia  
[Public Domain],  
via <http://www.consilium.europa.eu>

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Kazakhstan is now interested in purchasing Israeli drones, while Kazakhstan Engineering and the French company Sagem plan to manufacture unmanned aerial vehicles. In 2006-2007 Kazakhstan purchased from Israel 18 Lynx rocket launchers, six Semser 122-mm self-propelled howitzers, and 18 120-mm CARDOM mortar units for mounting on armored carriers. Another interesting deal is the upgrade (mounting of new optical-electronic systems) of T-72 tanks by the Italian company Finmeccanica, which was also planning to upgrade helicopters. Astana currently has 980 T-72 tanks and also upgraded the Su-27 and Su-27UB fighter jets to the Su-27M2 and Su-27UBM2 in Belarus. In 2011 Kazakhstan acquired six Eurocopter EC145 helicopters. A total of 45 medium multipurpose helicopters are to be supplied. Kazakhstan is also actively developing military-technical cooperation with Turkey, Singapore, Spain and other countries.

Among former Soviet republics, Ukraine has signed a number of defense agreements with Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan already has an agreement with Ukraine to jointly manufacture the BTR-4 armored personnel carrier. Kazakhstan Engineering chief Bulat Smagulov says that Ukraine offers “convenient technological solutions and competitive pricing.” The above facts show that Kazakhstan is expanding its arms market and strengthening positions by skillfully maneuvering between Russia and the rest of the world. Moreover, it participates regularly in SCO and CSTO joint exercises and has hosted NATO’s Steppe Eagle exercises for the ninth year in a row.

Is the step-up of arms purchases from third countries a sign that Kazakhstan is moving away from purchasing exclusively Russian materiel, and will this affect the country’s foreign policy? There is no simple answer to this. The multi-vector policy still plays a key role and Kazakhstan has so far managed to maintain an interesting balance in defense. However, a tilt away from Russia is already noticeable.

## CSTO

One positive aspect of CSTO membership is the ability to purchase Russian materiel and technology at a discount, but there are few examples of such purchases by other CSTO members. Some Russian mass media, notably Lenta.ru, report that in 2006 Russia supplied Belarus with free S-300 air defense systems to deploy near Brest and Grodno, thereby moving the CIS air defense impact zone 150 km westward. However, the Center for Analysis of World Arms Trade reports that four batteries of S-300PS air defense systems were supplied at discounted prices within CSTO and paid for with reciprocal supplies of MZKT-79221 chassis for Topol-M RS-12M1 missile systems. The contract to supply the S-300 to Belarus was signed in Minsk in mid-September 2005.

Yet the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation reports that Russian military exports to CSTO members make up just 5 percent of its total exports. The most active purchasers are Belarus and Armenia. Apparently Rosoboronexport does not find such agreements profitable,

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since the commission from the deals is about 1.5 percent instead of the customary 5 percent. Nezavisimaya Gazeta reports that Russia's military-technical cooperation through CSTO consists of supplying spare parts and upgrading existing weapons. However, it has also been reported that Russia is limited to just supplying, while after-sales service and spare parts for its equipment are provided by others.<sup>2</sup>

These circumstances beg the question as to what is the benefit to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan of military-technical cooperation within CSTO. Kyrgyzstan allows Russia to use its Kant Air Base free of charge, while the temporary residents of neighboring Manas have to pay \$60 million per year. Also, Tajikistan has been asking Russia for years to pay for the presence of the 201st Motorized Rifle Brigade. Kazakhstan simply has not been able to get decent compensation for the Proton tail assemblies that have fallen near Baikonur and damaged local agriculture. Russia is not even responsible for after-sales service of its own equipment, claiming that the republics should design and manufacture spare parts themselves.

### The Caspian

The current militarization of the Caspian directly impacts the whole security architecture of the region. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are the only Central Asian countries on the Caspian; the rest of the Caspian countries – Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan – are at an interesting point of their development and are closely linked with this region. War with Iran, if there is one, is bound to affect not only the Caspian area, but all nearby countries as well. All three non-Central Asian Caspian countries have been hard at work building up their military and industrial capacity and are actively involved in foreign procurement, in particular in air defense and naval equipment. Iran appears to be on the brink of outright armed action thanks to its ambiguous nuclear program and the regime's policy of intimidation and blackmail. Azerbaijan has been actively purchasing highly capable weapons from Israel (Gabriel anti-ship missiles, Heron, Searcher, and Hermes-450 attack drones, Green Pine radar stations, etc.), which shows that Azerbaijan plans to invest heavily in defense.

In early 2010 President Berdymukhammedov of Turkmenistan signed a decree on the development of its navy up to 2015. The Turkmen have already acquired six Smerch multiple rocket launchers, ten T-90 tanks, and two Tarantul corvettes. Other reports are that Ashkhabad repaired and purchased approximately \$500 million worth of combat equipment in Ukraine in exchange for gas. From Ukraine Turkmenistan received four Kalkan-M



Molniya guided missile boat  
[Public Domain] via <http://www.militaryimages.net>

ocean-going boats, ten Grif patrol boats, and one Kolchuga-M radar station with 600-km coverage. In 2003 Turkmenistan leased another seven coast guard boats and a destroyer from Iran. Another patrol boat, a Point Jackson, was obtained from the United States. Russia supplied two Sobols in 2009, in addition to another two Molniya missile boats.<sup>3</sup>

National Defense reports that Turkmenistan's two Gayratly and Edermen missile boats (both built in St. Petersburg) are equipped with four Uran-E anti-ship systems and twelve Igla MANPADS, but why does Turkmenistan need to be so heavily armed on the sea? And who is it planning to fight? Iran and Azerbaijan certainly give cause for concern. Of all the Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan has the closest commercial ties with Iran, mostly thanks to large gas exports. The presidents of both countries opened a new gas pipeline in January 2010, increasing the gas supplies to Iran's northeast provinces. Talks continue with Azerbaijan about three disputed fields. To that can be added that the Caspian has no legal status and that the border issue is unresolved. By strengthening its navy, Ashkhabad is showing that it expects threats to come from the sea.

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War with Iran would not benefit Kazakhstan either, in view of the project to build a railroad for access to Persian Gulf ports, which will run from Kazakhstan to Turkmenistan and then through Iran and will make transport routes and shipment time much shorter. Like the pipeline, the railroad involves close cooperation of the two countries with Iran, while any hostilities would undoubtedly have a negative economic impact, especially since Astana plans to turn the port of Aktau into a regional transit hub for NDN military cargo. In the event of a war neither Kazakhstan nor Turkmenistan is likely to side with Iran, despite trade and commercial interests. However, it needs to be understood that any type of military action will seriously damage all major current and future projects.

It is hard to say if Iran will enter into armed conflict, and, if so, with whom and when. Should, however, Iran go to war, each Central Asian country will face a difficult choice, given Iran's close geographical and other ties with all five countries. Presumably, none support or oppose Iran outright, but rather will probably await the reaction of Moscow and Beijing before taking a position, as they did with the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will be more difficult for the Turkmen and Tajiks, since Iran has close economic ties with the former and close ethnic ties with the latter. Because of its multi-vector diplomacy, Kazakhstan will likely advocate a constructive solution inclusive of all interested parties. Astana does not care how this is done; the important thing is to maintain outward neutrality. It is harder to predict how Uzbekistan will react, since Tashkent is not known for its stable foreign policy. Although, given current events, it could well side with the West. The Kyrgyz will not care one way or the other.

## NDN

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) has made stronger partner relations with Central Asia a priority. The Americans view the NDN as “promoting regional economic growth and opening up new opportunities for raw material export.”<sup>4</sup> This implies that the US plans to use Central Asia for withdrawing military cargo from Afghanistan. It could also mean an effort to redirect hydrocarbon exports from Central Asia toward South Asia, bypassing Russia and China. The talks on building the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline are incomplete and gaining momentum. The only thing of concern to Turkmenistan is the security of the route.

Viewed in this light, doling out to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan material that NATO will be leaving behind in 2014 after the withdrawal from Afghanistan seems like a bribe for the forthcoming redistribution of forces and balance in the region. It is anticipated that some of the materiel and equipment will stay in Central Asia, mostly going to Uzbekistan, based on the preliminary talks. It should be pointed out that Uzbekistan already has a fair number of weapons left behind after the 1989 withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. The threat of a serious imbalance in the region will therefore increase.

Eurasia.net reports that the US command has already said that surplus and obsolete US materiel will go to Uzbekistan, either free of charge or at a discount of 50 percent off the initial military export price. Of course, it is hard to refer to tank transporter trailers, fuel tankers, bulldozers and water carriers, as well as medical equipment, communication equipment or fire extinguishers along with mobile fitness facilities as a major advantage in the military balance of forces. Nevertheless, Moscow has already started to panic.

In a recent *Kommersant* article, Russian diplomats sharply criticized the American administration’s plans to hand over materiel to Central Asian countries following the withdrawal from Afghanistan, their chief argument being contravention of CSTO accords and agreements; possible curtailment of further Russian-made purchases by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; and the unwelcome consequences in the form of “addiction to overseas materiel” and “setting up of repair facilities in shops where Russian tanks and armored carriers used to be serviced.”<sup>5</sup> Both these statements are easy to dispute. Addiction to materiel as such will not develop, since the post-2014 handover will be a one-time event, the more so since there is no materiel of any significance. As for setting up repair facilities in shops, the Central Asian countries have no decent shops left: they have been doing the repairs themselves in Ukraine and Belarus for a long time.

Understandably, the Russian mass media have been inflaming the situation, citing protection of Russia’s interests in the region, where although there is a military presence, it is one that is largely limited to the 201st Motorized Rifle Brigade’s military base (Dushanbe, Kulyab and Kurgan-Tyube)



**“...it is a mistake to think that Moscow and Beijing have worked up every possible scenario ahead of time.”**

in Tajikistan and the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. Russia has no military presence as such in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, much less in Turkmenistan.

Meanwhile, the US command has been dropping veiled hints that it has no intention of leaving Central Asia after 2014. What status the Manas transit center will have is not known, but it is entirely predictable that an extra \$60 million will always come in handy for impoverished Kyrgyzstan. Especially interesting are the US statements about using the NDN routes to export natural resources, but in the opposite direction.

### **Conclusion**

Many specialists will argue that there is no arms race as such in Central Asia, but the defense budgets of the key countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) have obviously increased. The situation around Iran, militarization of the Caspian, CSTO's failure and the post-2014 withdrawal from Afghanistan are inflaming an already difficult situation, to which can be added sundry bilateral border and water disputes, domestic instability in Kyrgyzstan, and other destabilizing factors.

Central Asia is moving away from Russia, and this is manifested in many ways. Reluctance to purchase military goods in Russia, Uzbekistan's withdrawal from CSTO, reform of the Turkmen navy, Kazakhstan's active procurement of foreign materiel, plans to distribute US equipment after 2014, and new transport projects and routes that bypass Moscow all evidence that the region has begun to change strategically and geopolitically.

Also worthy of consideration are the changing geopolitical situation following the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ambitious military reform and militaristic aspirations of neighboring Russia, the China factor, and, of course, the socio-economic development of the region itself, with its undeniable stratification: economically backward Kyrgyzstan is “surviving” largely on Western aid, while more stable Kazakhstan has begun to dictate its rules of the game for foreign investors.

The West needs to learn to look at each Central Asian country individually and carefully, now that the overall regional situation is exposed to the risks mentioned. One never knows what will blow up, when, or where. Moreover, it is a mistake to think that Moscow and Beijing have worked up every possible scenario ahead of time. Though they view themselves as the main contributors of security in the region through their status as leaders of the CSTO and SCO, neither may be able to adequately respond to future threats to regional stability. Economic backwardness and political weakness make Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the most vulnerable. Both countries have experienced major crises and are still at the transformation stage. Recent events in Tajikistan demonstrated yet again how poorly the country's law enforcement and security forces operate.<sup>6</sup>

As the richest and most stable, Kazakhstan appears to be less in jeopardy, at least as long as the regime remains in power. As the most totalitarian, Uzbekistan can also hold on to power for the time being. Turkmenistan has always been neutral, but the fact remains that the country is arming itself to the hilt. What for? Thus, if the countries do not explode from within, outside threats could also destabilize the region. Such threats remain a fixture in the region – terrorism, drugs, and arms trafficking, separatism, Islamic radicalism, and the environmental safety that experts often forget, be it natural disasters or access to water.

## Notes

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- 6 Temur Varki, “Pamirskiy Gambit,” Asia-Plus, August 7, 2012, <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/pamirska-gambit>, (accessed October 15, 2012).